DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 465 CE 072 610

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TITLE Appalachian/African-American Cultural Education Project. Research to Practice.
INSTITUTION Kent State Univ., OH. Ohio Literacy Resource Center.
SPONS AGENCY Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Sep 96
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Blacks; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Background; *Cultural Education; High School Equivalency Programs; Inservice Teacher Education; Racial Discrimination; Social Discrimination; *Student Motivation; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Improvement; Teacher Workshops
IDENTIFIERS African Americans; *Appalachian People

ABSTRACT

During its first year, the Appalachian/African-American Cultural Education (ACE) Project undertook an evaluation to assess the program's impact on the knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes of its teachers. Assessment tools included pre- and posttests on cultural content, observation, teacher interviews, teacher self-evaluation, and participant evaluations. Teachers reported the following: (1) greater familiarity and comfort with cultural subject matter; (2) more confidence in their ability to facilitate group learning, as opposed to relying on traditional teaching materials and activities; (3) greater familiarity and comfort with alternative teaching methods; (4) increased desire and ability to treat students as equal partners in the learning process; (5) increased confidence in their own abilities as well as other personal changes; and (6) positive advances for their learners. Teachers identified a number of needs, such as ongoing support and assistance from inside the Urban Appalachian Council, resources to move students from oral to written stories, and their ongoing ability to expend the time and energy required. (YLB)

Ohio Literacy Resource Center

039-0200-0016
September 1996

Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Research to Practice

APPALACHIAN/AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURAL EDUCATION PROJECT

by
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The Urban Appalachian Council (UAC) was incorporated in 1974 to advocate and promote positive recognition and a decent quality of life for Appalachian migrants and their descendants in the greater Cincinnati area. Approximately one third of greater Cincinnati is urban Appalachian; roughly twelve percent of this urban Appalachian population is also African-American. UAC targets specific Cincinnati neighborhoods that are predominantly Appalachian and low-income. Many of these neighborhoods have significant African-American populations as well.

In September 1994, the Urban Appalachian Council initiated the Appalachian/African-American Cultural Education (ACE) Project into our community-based education programs in the East Price Hill, Over the Rhine, and South Fairmount neighborhoods. This program was initiated to address several issues. First, program participants and staff had identified as a concern the lack of knowledge of the history and heritage of their families and communities, which are predominantly Appalachian and/or African-American. Since these two ethnic groups experience significant discrimination and disadvantage in a city where they constitute a significant portion of the population, mutual understanding of and respect for each other's cultural heritage is critical.

Additionally, a principal barrier to educational skills is motivation, a problem more complex than it may seem. While adult learners usually realize the importance of education, past educational experiences and other problems prevent many adults from successful involvement in academic learning activities. The ACE program uses self-directed inquiry and is based on the participants' cultural, community, and experiential back-grounds--their own lives--and thus motivates adult learners to be involved in the learning process.

The goals of the ACE program are to:

- Bring teachers and students to greater awareness and appreciation of their own and their neighbors' cultural heritage, thus helping to build self and community esteem.
- Integrate cultural content into the ABLE/ABE/ GED program in order that our curriculum and practice be more relevant to our students.

- Increase students' motivation toward education as a way to reach not just short-term (e.g., GED attainment) but life-long goals.

- Provide a collaborative learning environment for our students.

During 1994-95 through an Ohio Literacy Resource Center research and development grant, our adult education teachers participated in a series of workshops to gain greater familiarity and comfort with using whole language, story circles, story building, and theater exercises in the classroom. Teachers and students worked throughout the year with Roadside Theater (an Appalachian theater troupe) and Junebug Productions (an African-American theater troupe), both of which have extensive experience in helping communities and organizations use cultural education as a tool for change.

As part of the first year of the ACE program, we undertook an evaluation project to assess the program's impact on the knowledge, behaviors and attitudes of our teachers. Our initial evaluation questions were: 1) What specific knowledge have teachers gained in terms of both cultural content and educational practice? and 2) How has that knowledge changed teacher behaviors and attitudes? Assessment tools included pre- and post-tests on cultural content, observation, teacher interviews, teacher self-evaluation, and participant evaluations.

Key Findings

Teachers report and exhibit *greater familiarity and comfort with cultural subject matter.*
At the beginning of the project, teachers asked that cultural content (e.g., African-American and Appalachian history, literature, art, as well as related materials, curriculum guides, lesson plans) be given to them to use with their classes. Over the last several months teachers have shown much greater independence in terms of creating materials, using libraries and resource lists, and most importantly *using their own knowledge of family and community history and that of their students as educational resources.*

We pre- and post-tested teachers on their knowledge of Appalachian history and culture at the beginning and end of the school year. The pre-test indicated that teachers were, in fact, fairly competent in this area of knowledge despite their claims to the contrary. While the post-test showed some gains, the primary difference was teachers' recognition of what they already knew, as reported through teacher interviews and as demonstrated through their work in the classrooms. Additionally, two of the three teachers post-tested wrote more about their own family background than in the pre-test, indicating increased identification between their personal histories and Appalachian history in general.

Over the past year, the primary tool for increasing cultural knowledge has been stories: history transmitted through the stories from Roadside Theater and Junebug Productions and through the teachers' and students' own stories about their families and experiences. While this has been an extremely beneficial first step, teachers recognize the need to incorporate other tools:

> "We (continue to need) more support from the cultural side. (We need) workshops specifically about Appalachian and African-American culture: who we are, famous people, what cultures are like now. It was better to do it through our own stories first, that was the priority, but learning history (through other resources) is a way of reinforcing."

Teachers are more confident of their *ability to facilitate group learning, as opposed to relying on traditional teaching materials and activities.*
Evidence of this includes teachers' reports as well as their increased use of story circles, whole language, and other non-traditional approaches to a variety of subjects. This was a particular concern at the beginning of the project:

"I have to say that at the beginning I was somewhat confused. I couldn't understand (or explain to the students) how their stories applied to (working to achieve) their GEDs. (Junebug's workshop) helped me to understand the story circle concept. Since then (we) have done quite a few stories."

Another teacher reported:

"I have come a long way in learning how to take any idea and turn it into an academic experience."

The story circle method was useful in this regard:

"We learned about (using story circles) to get people to write. We learned how to branch a story off to cover areas such a social studies, science math and writing skills."

Teachers report and exhibit *greater familiarity and comfort with alternative teaching methods.* This year, teachers primarily received training in whole language, specifically as related to the story circle process. However, teachers have identified the relationship of the story circle to other teaching methods, as well:

"We as teachers here are convinced that the story circle/story method is more related to the cooperative style of learning than many others."

While aware that they have been using a variety of alternative methods, teachers have identified the need for additional training on these methods in the future:

"I would have liked more information on different teaching methods-that got left behind. But I can see 'the big picture' now. I think I'm already practicing some alternative methods even though we haven't had a workshop. Probably it's better to see the overall view first--I'm 'right brain.' I need to see the whole thing. But I would have liked more seminars to help make sure I'm heading in the right direction. In my heart I believe I am."

Another teacher also reported becoming more confident in the direction she was heading:

"I learned that I already did some of the things we were learning about in my class (before the project started)."

Teachers show *increased desire and ability to treat students as equal partners in the learning process.* This came to be a goal of most of the teachers as the project progressed. Several of the teachers noticed specific gains in this area. One teacher wrote:

"I've changed for the good in the last year. I'm not as fearful in the experimenting with unconventional approaches as the story circle. In the beginning the story approach was intimidating to me because of the control issue. What I mean is that we as teachers need to relinquish control at times and become facilitators, not just teachers. It is a little scary at times to be unable to tell where the stories will lead-the finished result may not be easily determined."

These changes were especially evident as teachers and students worked together to prepare a public sharing of their work. The lines between teachers and students blurred as all worked together to decide what stories or activities to present, who should play what part, and how the presentation should be organized.

But change is seldom painless. Teachers and students from three adult education programs presented their projects at a community meeting hall. One program's decision about how to share its work had to be revised in order to fit within the overall format. This caused concern for that program's teacher who had tried to be especially consistent in allowing her students control of the

process. She felt uncomfortable going back to the students to request a change and reported back to the group the students' chagrin at being told to change. Ultimately, the students presented in a way that was comfortable to them *and* fit the overall program. However, the situation raised the need to deal with the issue of supporting the needs of individual programs while serving the goals of the overall project.

We have also needed to address differences of opinion as to what degree of relinquishing control is desirable. One teacher reported:

> "(The students now) have full control of all decision-making. They really are in charge of what happens in the classroom. Their leadership and decision-making abilities really have blossomed."

It has been--and continues to be--necessary to explore the issue of leadership within the democratic or collaborative process. Most participants feel that the teacher must maintain a leadership role even while striving toward a collaborative learning environment and supporting the leadership abilities of others.

Teachers report and exhibit *increased confidence in their own abilities as well as other personal changes.* One teacher reported:

> "I have to say through all this project, it has made me a more confident person. To believe in myself, to accept me for who I am, and that all I need to do is just DO IT!!... It doesn't matter if you don't know how to do it all, just do the first step."

Another said:

> "The hardest part...was learning to accept others' styles and own sense of how to get things done. Accepting others' ways has been a big accomplishment for me...I (have become) a better listener. I understand the importance of listening."

The third teacher agreed:

> "I listen more intently. I also work better with (my co-teacher). (This project) has helped us have a common denominator."

Teachers report *positive advances for their learners.* While we did not focus our evaluation efforts on students this year, teachers have begun to identify positive effects. First, teachers report *increased confidence and self esteem* among their students, which was the teachers' primary goal for the project from the beginning.

> "I'm proud to say the students are growing and there are visible signs of this. Many are taking more responsibility and becoming more assertive."

> "(This) is a better way of learning. It has made the students' self esteem raise sky-high. They are apt to do just about anything now."

Second, teachers report that *their classes as a whole are more motivated and productive.*

> "Students get along better with each other than before... There is unity in the classroom. Students are leaders in the classroom...not all the time, but more. They speak up more when we do things as a group."

Another teacher stated:

> "We are also, as a class, closer unit. (The students) take it on themselves to teach each other... They inspire me to come to work everyday."

Third, teachers report *increases in academic achievement*, especially in reading and language mechanics.

Finally, teachers report that *students are more aware and respectful of their own and others' cultural heritage*:

> "We (teachers and students) are understanding each other as we hear each others' stories. We understand our past, the differences between cultures, and that it's all right to be different."

However, it's important to note that the teachers encourage us to go further with the multi-cultural aspect of the project:

> "I am not saying that we shouldn't educate within a cultural context. But maybe we should do this within a larger context: an urban culture."

In summary, we found this project to be an effective teacher-education tool. Teachers increased their familiarity and comfort with cultural subject matter and discovered ways to integrate it into the academic curriculum. Teachers were able to meet their own goals by using alternative teaching methods, especially in facilitating group-learning activities. Their confidence in their own abilities grew, which in turn increased their confidence in their students, seeing them as equal partners in the learning process. Additionally, because teachers and students were learning together, the teachers continued to be motivated by the academic and personal progress made by their students. However, teachers also felt some frustration, primarily in regards to the time and energy required to implement the ACE project and the unmet need for additional support and information from sources internal and external to UAC.

The Next Steps

Our initial findings show that we are on the right track. Teachers and students are finding that whole language, story circles, story building, and theater exercises are all useful tools as they work toward their goals. Teachers have identified an objective of better integrating these activities as on-going components of the educational program in the coming year.

> "(I want for us) to continue to grow. (A next step is) to use storytelling as a way of teaching writing skills, using books as reinforcement for this."

Teachers have identified a number of needs and concerns around this. First, they need on-going support and assistance from inside UAC and from outside resources, primarily workshops on other teaching methods (particularly on collaborative and cooperative learning) and on some specific aspects of Appalachian and African-American culture. Teachers have also requested resources to move students from oral to written stories.

Teachers have indicated the need for on-going support from UAC's cultural staff, pointing to areas where the previous level of support has been helpful:

> "(Having the Cultural Coordinator) pushing us on was good impetus. We need to (continue to) have some accountability and to come together to see how we are progressing."

Teachers also identified areas where the level of support has been less than adequate:

> "We wanted to do our family histories but could not get anyone to come in. I was given a few names of people to speak to the class on various things but none of them (worked out)."

Finally, while teachers clearly report the desire to continue, there are concerns about their ongoing ability to expend the time and energy required, especially given the increased demand on them and their students through welfare reform and other mandates:

> "To do these projects I need time to prepare and help with ideas we can carry out. In my class the students are expected to be in and out in less than six months. Now how am I going to get them ready for their GEDs and do these projects too?"

We are continuing to struggle with these issues as we move forward to incorporate the teachers' objective to better integrate our cultural work with the academic curriculum. In the 1995-96 school year, we began to evaluate the impact the project has had on the curriculum and instructional program and how those changes have impacted the academic and non-academic goals students set and their progress toward them. We also began to look at the ACE program's effect on program enrollment, attendance, and retention.

UAC PARTICIPATING STAFF:
Teachers: **Mike Brierly**, **Debbie Holmes** (East Price Hill Adult Education Program); **Mary Ann Roth** (Appalachian Identity Center); **Sandy Fisher** (South Fairmount Community Center Youth Program)
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More information about this project can be found in the book *Down Home, Down Town: Urban Appalachians Today* (1996), edited by Phillip J. Obermiller. Available from Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company (800-228-0810) for $15.95 plus shipping and handling; ISBN 0-7872-2025-6

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